

ADVENTURES IN SOCIAL WORK
The Children's Center Crusade
1973-1976

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INTRODUCTION

**"Writing a memoir is to utter
what must not be erased."**

- Richard Ford

These days when the kids from the Center visit me in waking dreams they are polite, almost deferential and, most often, talkative. A far cry from forty-five years ago when their visits were often angry and accusatory.

I've written a collection of 92 essays detailing my experiences, primarily between 1973 and 1975, when I was employed as a Professionally Trained Social Worker for Rhode Island Child Welfare Services (CWS), a division of the Rhode Island Department of Social and Rehabilitative Services. I was assigned to the Children's Center Social Services unit tasked with providing casework services to the children placed in residence at the Dr. Patrick I. O'Rourke Children's Center

The Children's Center was not a tucked away, isolated institution. In fact, at first glance, the open setting consisting mostly of brick, stone and wood structures appeared almost bucolic. Co-located with Rhode Island College on a large tract of state owned land bordered by Mt. Pleasant Avenue in the Mt. Pleasant sector of Providence and Fruit Hill Avenue in North Providence. Both neighborhoods were attractive, working class neighborhoods consisting largely of single family homes. In fact, my family moved to the neighborhood in 1958 and my mother lived there until November, 2013.

Ironically, the State of Rhode Island closed the Center in 1978. Today it is part of Rhode Island College, identified as the East Campus. My former office in what was then labeled M/S Cottage

houses the Rhode Island College School of Social Work. (Appendix 3).

In the early years, right after I resigned from CWS in June of '75 the kids would show up in my dreams with angry, often tear filled faces, shaking their fists at me and yelling "Why?"

The Dr. Patrick I. O'Rourke Children's Center was a horribly dysfunctional institution where the children living there, the census when I worked there ranged from 150-240 children, in ten cottages on an open campus-like setting were subject to emotional, physical and (in at least one verifiable situation) sexual abuse at the hands of the Child Care staff including the Superintendent.

These inhumane and probably criminal practices were both openly and tacitly supported by the Superintendent of the Center and ignored by senior officials of the State of Rhode Island.

The Children's Center was a separate division under the Department of Social & Rehabilitative Services. However, both divisions reported up to a SRS senior administrator, Anthony E. Ricci, who in turn reported to the Director of SRS, John Affect. The Department of SRS was located in a state office building (Forand Building) on Reservoir Avenue in Cranston.

While CWS had satellite offices across the state (i.e., Westerly, Newport), it was headquartered on the grounds of the Children's Center. Several of the buildings on the grounds housed both CWS staff and children. Two buildings (A&B Cottage, D cottage) housed only CWS staff. The setting was always busy and bustling, except on weekends.

The children were either "wards of the state," legally committed by the judicial system to CWS or "voluntarily" signed over to CWS by parents or guardians. Most, if not all, were assessed as abused or neglected.

The essays attempt to portray my two year experience as I recollect it. First as a 25 year old social worker, right out of grad school. Then as my concerns about child care practices

grew, as a chronicler of the children's experiences with the child care staff - documenting stories of abuse and determined to bring my findings to the SRS/CWS administration.

I gathered a small group of like-minded staff including my supervisor, formed the "Ad Hoc Committee", presented our findings to the Administration coupled with a set of reforms and recommendations to improve conditions at the Center and attempted to engage senior members of the SRS/CWS administration in a joint effort to create a very different Children's Center experience for the children in placement.

The administration of CWS and its oversight agency, the Department of Social & Rehabilitation Services, comprised almost entirely of graduate trained social workers like me, were completely uninterested in addressing any issues with the institution's child care practices or program design. They employed many different strategies including delay, denial, rationalization, threats of sanctions and personal attacks to defeat the Ad Hoc Committee's efforts to effect positive change at the Center.

I have never been able to answer, satisfactorily, the question: Why?

The last section of essays depict my actions as a "whistleblower," after the Ad Hoc Committee collapsed, carrying an existential megaphone, literally screaming to anyone who would listen about the abuses occurring at the Center. Anyone included the judicial system, the mainstream media and elected officials. Fortunately two young "budding" journalists, students at Brown University, listened.

This essay arc, "The Children's Center Crusade," follows a linear perspective focusing on the events and processes of my efforts to effect reform. However, the consequences of defying the status quo are not glossed over.

Today, when the "kids" visit me, their faces frozen in time, we are talking quietly, laughing at a joke, getting a candy bar or

an ice cream cone, or lemonade and sometimes sitting on their corner of their bed in the cottage talking.

I learned that you can change the world (or a tiny piece of it) if you stand up to authority, but the cost of doing so can be prohibitive.

That cost, to me was significant. It is no less heartbreaking now than it was 45 years ago.

NOTES:

1. The last name of each child who appears in the essays have been shortened to their initial. Their first names are accurate.
2. The names of all senior SRS and CWS staff are accurate.
3. I drew on a wealth of source material to complete this memoir. That material includes the Ad Hoc Committee Report, correspondence, memos, clinical notes, appointment schedules and notebooks full of impressions and thoughts. These source documents which I have held onto since leaving CWS in 1975, were instrumental in allowing me to craft the narrative.
4. The complete Ad Hoc Committee Report, with an added Table of Contents, is included as Appendix 1. An update I did for the Governor in April, 1975 is included as Appendix 2.
5. I used song lyrics and quotes from many different sources at the start of each chapter to set the tone and place the experience in a certain context.